

The Newtown Board of Education
Attn: Deborra Zukowski, Chair
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Newtown, CT 06470
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To whom it may concern,

On January 26, 2023, the Newtown Board of Education voted to send a letter regarding transportation concerns to the Honorable Ned Lamont and other members of his administration, along with CT legislators representing Newtown. That letter is appended below. Since our focus on the problem, our transportation company has been providing temporary relief that ensures our students get bused to school on time.

As the Chair of the Newtown Board of Education, speaking only as a member since I haven't the time to present this to my Board, I'd like to add a few comments of my own pertaining to S.B. No. 1081.

1. It has been suggested that Newtown has a more severe issue maintaining drivers because we use a 2-tier busing system. Drivers are paid only for time that buses are moving and, in general, the more tiers, the more time buses move. Several years ago, our Board moved to a 2-tier system after spending considerable time reviewing the impact of sleep times on students. If indeed our use of a 2-tier system is a significant contributor to our busing disruption, our choice is then to either continue with the busing disruption or to reduce the efficacy of our instructional time. This is a choice that has no positive outcomes for our students.

2. Some of our families were carrying much more of the burden of the busing disruption than others; some bus drivers have many more absences than others and so their buses make up a notable portion of buses that have not made bus runs. We have asked if disparities could be reduced by shifting drivers. There is reluctance to do so because drivers are not used to the routes and generally need training to prepare for new runs. I would appreciate your efforts in ensuring that the hurdle of unfamiliar routes be reduced, whether by use of technology (GPS) or other means.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Deborra Zukowski

Newtown Board of Education, Chair

---- Newtown Board of Education Letter to State Officials ---

Dear Governor Lamont, Commissioner Russell-Tucker, Senator Hwang, Representative Bolinsky, Representative Foncello, and Attorney General Tong,

As members of the Newtown Board of Education, we have been actively supporting our Superintendent and his administration as they navigate Newtown Public Schools' first normal school year since the start of the pandemic. Our District has made notable progress addressing interrupted learning and helping our students with mental health struggles. However we, along with our colleagues around the state, are still struggling with transportation; we do not have

enough bus drivers to provide consistent busing that gets our students to school on time. We ask your assistance to help all of us find solutions that ensure buses can once again properly serve our families.

We understand that throughout our state and country many older drivers now feel uncomfortable with the potential health risks of driving large numbers of kids and that there is a robust job market that pulls younger drivers away from a field that is often low-paying and high stress, resulting in a smaller pool of qualified drivers to fill the needs of many districts. Also, candidates who receive their Commercial Driver's Licenses (CDLs) through provider-sponsored training programs are often lured away by better pay and benefits offered by corporate America. (Competing with such offers would place too high an economic burden on our taxpayers).

In Newtown specifically, we entered into a new 5-year contract with All-Star Transportation in May, 2022, when the driver shortage was even more pronounced. The company was the only one to respond to our RFP. We were told that non-competitive bidding was yet another consequence of the driver shortage since transportation providers were unwilling to take on the risk of finding an adequate number of drivers in new districts while facing their own shortages. By the start of the 2022-2023 school year, All-Star was able to provide one driver per bus (but no spares, as required in the contract), in large part because of the Board's and District's actions to consolidate buses and provide additional money for driver retention. However as we moved into the late fall and winter, illnesses increased. Without spare drivers buses were "parked," i.e., not available to transport students to and/or from school. In December, 18 buses were parked and 24 buses were parked for the first half of January. When buses are parked, the affected students must either be transported to school by their families or wait for a bus to finish its scheduled runs and return for them, meaning they are significantly late to school and/or late getting home from school.

The driver shortage has also impacted our extracurricular and special education out-of-district transportation. Because of the shortage, All-Star - our contracted provider of extracurricular transportation - has not been able to provide services for many sport-related trips resulting in a high cost to the District to hire alternate transportation. While the District has been creative, for example sharing buses with other districts, there is still a significant financial burden to absorb. Like All-Star, EdAdvance - our out-of-district Special Education transportation provider - has been unable to provide us with enough drivers to fulfill their contract since the beginning of the year. We have also supplemented their services with multiple other providers, at close to twice the cost.

The bus driver shortage affects all Connecticut school districts in some manner. We ask if there is something you can do to help address the driver shortage in the short term while districts continue recruiting and training. For instance, we understand that Massachusetts activated the National Guard to transport students to and from school. Extra personnel, working in conjunction with the existing transportation providers, would significantly help relieve some of this pressure. Having such short-term assistance would help ensure that our students are able to fully

participate in our educational programs while avoiding any economic burdens that families and our District might face because of unbudgeted cost overages in transportation.

Thank you for taking the time to read our concerns and hopefully, together, we can navigate this difficult situation and come up with some creative solutions.

Sincerely,

Deborra Zukowski, John Vouros, Don Ramsey, Dan Cruson, Janet Kuzma, Jenn Larkin, and
Alison Plante

CC: Christopher Melillo, Superintendent of Newtown Public Schools

CC: Patrice McCarthy, CAGE Executive Director and General Counsel

CC: Fran Rabinowitz, CAPSS Executive Director

CC: The Newtown Board of Education